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FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9398  
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE  
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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 2776  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0599  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 0475  
RUCPDOG/DEPT OF COMMERCE WASHDC  
RUEATRS/DEPT OF TREASURY WASHDC  
RHEBAAA/DEPT OF ENERGY WASHDC  
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL  
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC  
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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STATE FOR SCA/CEN, DRL

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: GREATER ENGAGEMENT IN THE SPHERE OF  
RELIGIOUS COOPERATION

REF: A) ASHGABAT 993, B) ASHGABAT 827, C) ASHGABAT 977

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: The USAID Religion, State and Society (RSS) specialist found a greater willingness by officials to discuss the possibility of cooperation during his September 17-21 visit to Turkmenistan. The director of the Institute for Democracy and Human Rights asked USAID to schedule a follow-up meeting after her return from UNGA to discuss potential opportunities for cooperation. The RSS specialist also noted a de-emphasis of the Turkmenbashy cult in the mosques he visited and a large number of worshipers, including young boys. END SUMMARY.

MORE ENGAGEMENT ON THE TOPIC OF RELIGION...

13. (SBU) The USAID Religion, State, and Society specialist found a different atmosphere from previous trips during his September 17-21 visit to Turkmenistan. He had good meetings with Institute for Democracy and Human Rights Director Ahmedova, the Pro-Rector and History Faculty Chair at Turkmen State University, and Council on Religious Affairs Deputy Chairman Gurbanov. According to RSS specialist, he found his Turkmen government interlocutors this time to be much more open and engaging. In fact, Ahmedova asked that USAID schedule a follow-up meeting after her return from UNGA to discuss potential opportunities for cooperation. RSS specialist had hoped to meet with students at Turkmen State University's Theology Department (which is under the History Faculty), but was unable to do so since it was not part of the original request.

...LESS TURKMENBASHY

14. (SBU) Besides finding a more natural dialogue with Turkmenistan government officials regarding programs and cooperation, RSS specialist (himself a Muslim American) observed changes in religious observance. For example, elements reflecting the former leader's personality cult appear to have disappeared from worship services. At the two mosques he attended during his trip the only mention of Turkmenbashy was a supplication at the end of prayers at the Gypjak

mosque - a definite change from RSS specialist's previous visits (which were before Niyazov's death).

¶5. (SBU) Attendance at both mosques was good. RSS specialist estimated that there were several hundred people in attendance at Gypjak mosque, including women. Most interestingly, the crowd included 75-100 boys aged 9-14 years old. They obviously knew how to pray and how to make ablution. The boys were together, but RSS didn't know if they had arrived as a group or were just kids from the neighborhood. He did not notice a special bus outside.

RUHNAMA ON ITS WAY OUT?

¶6. (SBU) RSS specialist wondered if, recent Ruhnama Day festivities aside (Ref. C), Niyazov's tome isn't being deemphasized. During previous visits, a point was always made to show him the Ruhnama room of the particular location. There was much less of that during this visit. RSS specialist also believed that the release of the former Grand Mufti, who was an opponent of the Ruhnama (Ref. B), and his appointment to the Council on Religious Affairs is an indication of plans to gradually move away from Niyazov's "Holy Book."

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT: The willingness of Turkmenistan officials to engage in cooperation that touches on religion and society is heartening. Post finds RSS observations that the Turkmenbashy cult may be declining in religious observances particularly notable, given concerns expressed in August by members of a delegation from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. Indications are that Ahmedova wants the Institute for Democracy and Human Rights to be a serious entity and one that can fully engage with western partners (septel).

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